

## Theology in Three Dimensions

By [John Frame](#)

### PERSPECTIVES

TO GIVE A detailed description of a tree, you really need to look at it from all sides. But of course, you can't see all sides at once. You may, therefore, need to do some walking. Your eyes won't be enough. But your eyes and your legs can combine to do a better job.

But even then your description won't be good enough for some purposes. For a scientific description, you will need some instruments: tools for a careful dissection, a powerful microscope. For a tree, ordinary as it may be, is a complicated thing. Think of all the veins in the leaves, the rings in the trunk.

Think of how the tree brings sunlight, rain, and soil nutrients together to grow as it should. And then think of how each of these processes is itself complex. Today, we like to think that ultimately it reduces to protons and other tiny particles. To describe all of this, we need to look at the tree—not just from north, south, east, and west, but from a truly vast number of perspectives, external and internal.

And there is more. To gain a fuller perspective of the tree, we need to think about more than the tree itself. We also need to think about the tree's relationships with other things: the sun, the atmosphere, the weather, the insects, the bacteria, other trees, and the tree's history as indicated by its rings and the laws of chemistry, biology, and physics. We need to look at the human influence on the breeding of the tree through the centuries and the way this and similar trees have been used in human civilization. Each of these will lead us to indefinite numbers of additional perspectives, enlarging the knowledge available to our present perspective.

Trees appear in many famous artistic creations. They are part of many noted scenes, like the White House Christmas tree lighting and the California redwoods. They play significant roles in history, such as the battering rams used in medieval warfare. Often they take on symbolic significance, as the Tree of Life in the Bible, or the palms used to advertise sunny places. There are many trees we don't understand until we look far beyond their physical properties.

Vern Poythress defines "perspective" as "a view from somewhere. More precisely, it is a (1) view of something (2) by someone (3) from somewhere."<sup>1</sup> A perspective, literally, is a position from which a person sees something. It is the standpoint, the angle from which he looks. By extension, the term includes other sensory experience-hearing, taste, touch, and sight-as well as the activities we call reasoning.

A person's perspective is the standpoint<sup>2</sup> from which he gains his overall understanding of the world around him. My personal perspective is what I sense around me at the moment when I am using my legs, scientific tools, and the like to get a fuller understanding. Ultimately, all this knowledge comes to me through my own body through my senses and the operations by which my brain organizes my sense impressions into knowledge.

As we explore the tree in broader and broader contexts, more and more perspectives emerge. We consider the human influence on the breeding of the tree through the centuries and the way this and similar trees have been used in human civilization. Each of these will lead us to indefinite numbers of additional perspectives, enlarging the knowledge available to our present perspective.

So each perspective includes others. My sensory experience includes what I sense from far away as well as what I sense from close up. It includes what I can see from the north and from the south. It includes what I sense through the naked eye and through scientific instruments. These are multiple perspectives, but they all are part of the general personal perspective that constitutes my experience and assessment of the real world.

In one way each person's perspective includes the entire universe, though it is, in a different sense, a small part of the universe. When I stand at night, looking into the sky, I see billions of stars, planets, and other cosmic objects. I don't see them in detail or with absolute clarity. But my visual field has no end. The same is true when I look across the world, into the horizon. There is, again, no limit to my field of vision I see everything that is visible from my position in space. In one sense I see everything, though not with perfect clarity.

But from another perspective(!) I judge my perspective to be very tiny. In comparison with other people, I know very little. And I am always aware of the limits of what I can perceive and what I can know.

When I meditate on the vastness, and the smallness, of human knowledge, it is natural to compare my knowledge to that of God. This book deals with Christian

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<sup>1</sup> See Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The Greek thinker Archimedes is quoted as saying "Give me a place to stand (*a pou sto*) and I shall move the earth." For Archimedes, the *pou sto* gives not only understanding but also power.

theology, and so readers will understand that it presupposes the biblical God. God is the one who made this vastly and beautifully complicated world.

Each tree displays his vast wisdom. Jesus said that God sees each sparrow fall (Matt. 10:29), and he knows the number of hairs on our heads (Matt. 10:30). Certainly he also knows every leaf on our tree, every root, every strip of bark.

To understand better the vastness of God's knowledge, we can compare it to our own, but also to the knowledge of animals. I have owned three Pembroke Welsh Corgis through my life, and they have been the smartest dogs alive. I taught them not only to sit, come, stand, and roll over, but also to turn to the right and turn to the left. I taught one of them to respond to dogs and cats on the TV screen (a lesson I eventually came to regret). I am sure that in a post-apocalyptic world a Welsh Corgi could find food for me and my wife better than I could. But my dogs always had one notable level of ignorance: they had no idea what I was writing in my books. They could not read even the first paragraphs of the introductions.

Surely the comparison between my dogs' knowledge and my own is similar to the difference between my knowledge and God's. There are items of knowledge that are quite elementary to God that I have no idea of. People who use their reason to figure out the coherence of God's attributes and the reason for God's creation of evil would be like my dog if he had tried to master the first sentence in my ST. To his immense credit, he never tried to do that.

Theologians say that because God made everything and remembers what he has made, he is omniscient. But his knowledge includes not only the basic facts about the trees and the hairs and the sparrows. He sees all these things from every possible perspective. He sees the sparrow from behind its head as well as in front of its face. And he sees my hair from its follicle to its ever decreasing pigment. He sees it from his omniscient divine perspective, but he also understands fully how my wife experiences my hair. And he is able to see it as anyone else sees it, from every possible vantage point.

He knows what the sparrow looks like to another sparrow, or to the hawk soaring overhead. He sees my hair from the vantage point of the fly on the wall of my office. He even knows perspectives that are merely possible: he knows what my hair would look like from the vantage point of a fly on the wall, even when there is no fly on my wall. So God is not only omniscient but omniperspectival.

## **INCORPORATING OTHER HUMAN PERSPECTIVES**

As I sit in my office chair, I can look out the window, which conveys a splendid view of the seminary parking lot. That is, it gives me access to a perspective on the lot that comes to me essentially through my eyes. If I were to go outside, that

perspective would be enriched by sounds, smells, and things I can touch, along with the intellectual reflections of my brain.

That is all part of one perspective—my perspective, the perspective accessible by my own body. In one sense, I have only that one perspective on the world. Everything I know, I access through my body. And, as we sometimes say, I can't step outside my own skin. But learning never ends with my immediate experience.

I see George on the parking lot, and I ask him whether his five-year-old boy has recovered from his cold. He tells me yes, and I add that fact to my knowledge of the world. I don't see the child, and his health is not part of my immediate experience. But George is part of that, and I trust George's reports of his own immediate experience. So George's knowledge enriches mine. My perspective gets larger by incorporating George's perspective. So, though I cannot step outside my own skin, I can in some ways add the perspectives of others to my own.

Of course, I don't trust everybody the way I trust George. And on some matters I might not even fully trust George. The expansion of my perspective is a critical task. I have to make judgments about whether and to what extent the perspectives of others are reliable, and to what extent their testimonies about their experience are true. But my critical thoughts are also part of my perspective on the world.

How do I make such judgments? What is the process that enables me to judge to what extent another's perspective is true? To a large extent our judgments in such matters begin with intuition. Some testimony, like George's testimony about his son, seems obviously true. George is a person like me. He has proved himself right in the past. I have not known him to deceive me or to be mistaken about something in his immediate experience. There is no problem with his. And there is the "ring of truth" in what he says. It fits together with the judgments I make about other aspects of my experience. These factors come together harmoniously. They are "intuitive." We just know, because we know what truth sounds like and looks like.

In other cases, however, there are questions to which the answers aren't obvious. Sabrina is a Democrat, and she tells me that we could give a free college education to everyone if we could tax millionaires and billionaires 90 percent of their income. That sounds dubious to me, for others have told me that even if government confiscates 100 percent of the income of the rich, it would not come near to the amount required. And even if this policy were effective, would it even then be fair to put a 90 percent tax on some people's income?

In this case, I cannot just trust Sabrina as I could trust George. It isn't sufficient just to accept her perspective and add it to mine, as I did with George. Sabrina is

not merely a set of sense organs that I could add to my own. Rather, she has done some thinking about reality from her own perspective, and she has added that thinking to what she considers her accumulated knowledge. But I cannot simply accept her testimony uncritically. I must make my own judgment.

So if I want to take up the question, I must do some research myself, or at least consult a greater number of authorities, in order to see if government can educate everybody by taxing the rich. But then I have to ask, what authorities are reliable? If Sabrina's ideas are not always reliable, where do I go to find the truth? I can read newspapers, books, and online material, but how do I judge, in each case, whether its testimony is reliable?

By my own intuition? In one sense, yes. Our judgments are our own. Again, we cannot step out of our own skin. But we all know that we, too, often make mistakes. If I judge that Sabrina's judgment is unreliable, I must admit that she may well have the same opinion of mine. Of course, both she and I must "use our own judgment." But that is tautological. That only means that we think what we think. It is not ground for claiming that the current contents of our minds are infallible, or even that they are better than someone else's. We often change our minds, deferring to someone who seems to have a better view than we have had up to now. We do not use our minds as static measuring sticks, rejecting every idea that disagrees with ours. At least we should not do this. We should be flexible enough so that occasionally we can learn something new, so that sometimes, at least, we can abandon old ideas and accept better ones, even better measuring sticks.

Knowing the world, then, is a complicated process in constant change. It is a matter of interacting with our multitude of perspectives and with the perspectives of others, going here, then there.

But this sounds like we have no direction at all. We are like specks of dust, blowing in the wind, here and there, "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). Is there no map telling us where to go? Is there no method for making the right choices?

## **ACCESS TO GOD'S PERSPECTIVE**

The Bible teaches that God has granted us some access to his own perspective, the omniperspective, the perspective that includes and corrects all other perspectives. I say "some" access, not total access. Total access would mean that our mind is identical to God's, and that cannot be. God is the creator, and we are the creature. The discrepancy is not only quantitative, that God knows all the facts and we only know some. Rather, it is qualitative, that God's knowledge of every fact is different from our knowledge of the same fact. God knows, for example, that robins fly south in the winter; so do we. But God's knowledge of

that fact is very different from ours, in many ways. For one thing, God's knowledge is original, ours derivative. God made the robins and equipped them to do what they do. The proposition, "robins fly south" is a proposition God has made to be true. When I say that robins fly south, I am stating something God has made to be true.

God's knowledge, therefore, is the criterion of ours. Our beliefs are true insofar as they measure up to God's. But God's are always true, just because they are his. He is his own criterion, the ultimate test of his own thoughts. But our thoughts do not serve as their own criterion. That is to say, they are not *autonomous*.

But, given the qualitative difference between God's thoughts and ours, God nevertheless enables us to gain some of his knowledge, to affirm the same truths he affirms. And when we do, we are incorporating, to some extent, God's perspective into our own.

## REVELATION

Theologians use the term "revelation" to indicate the ways in which God enables us to incorporate his perspectives into ours. They distinguish:

1. "General" or "natural" revelation, God revealing himself through the created world (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:18-21).
2. "Special" revelation, God speaking human language to, and then through, prophets (Deut. 18:15-22), apostles (John 14:25), and the written text of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21).
3. "Existential" revelation, God revealing himself through human beings as his "image" (Gen. 1:26-27). This includes his giving us ability to understand and apply other forms of revelation and therefore to develop our own sense of right and wrong (the "conscience," Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Tim. 1:5).<sup>3</sup>

In these ways, we gain some access to God's own perspective, as I described that access above. Much of the time, however, our knowledge of God's revelation is fragmentary and uncertain. For example, we learn by natural revelation that the earth's climate has changed over the years. But the role of man's actions in recent climate change is debatable. We learn by natural revelation that food nourishes the body and also that some substances are toxic

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<sup>3</sup> I have discussed these various forms of revelation in DWG and in ST. "General" and "special" revelation are standard terms from the theological literature. "Existential" revelation is not, but is unique with me, so far as I know. I try to explain the reason for using a threefold, rather than merely twofold, division in these previous writings. Those who read the present book to its conclusion will also understand my preference for a threefold distinction.

to human health. But just what is nourishing, and what is toxic, and in what quantities? These are subjects about which there is much disagreement. Over the years the consensus of human research has changed, and sometimes changed back again.

Even beliefs that some claim are based on the Bible are not always absolutely certain. Some people believe that Jesus expelled the moneychangers from the temple at the beginning of his ministry (suggested by John 2:13-17). Others believe that he did this toward the end (suggested by Matt. 21:12-17).

Many believe he did it twice, others that either Matthew or John reported this event out of chronological order. None of these views is immediately obvious or certain.

But there are some teachings of Scripture that are so clear and/or pervasive that nobody can question them. Scripture clearly teaches that there is one God, that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, that Jesus died for sinners and rose again, and that God promises salvation from sin to those who trust in Jesus' sacrifice and embrace him as Lord.

So God grants us certainty of the Bible's teaching, in many cases, by its sheer obviousness. But there is also a supernatural factor. Paul says to the congregation of a church he had planted, "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5). That is, God sent his Holy Spirit to change the minds of these hearers, so that they would come to believe, and believe with assurance (see also 1 Thess. 2:13).

When that happens - that is, when God through our natural powers and the Spirit's supernatural influence convinces us that a certain belief is warranted by God's own speech then God authorizes us to believe it with certainty, with assurance.<sup>4</sup> That means that there are certain propositions, such as "Christ died for sinners" that we can state on the authority of God himself. Like the prophets, we may preface these by saying "Thus says the Lord," or "This is what God says." In these cases, we can be certain that we have accessed God's own perspective on the truth, his omniperspective, which includes all other perspectives.

But, again, we do not have such certainty about every-thing. Humility and wisdom require us to distinguish when we have certainty and when we don't. And when we are uncertain, we should be eager to benefit from the perspectives of others-especially the omniperspective of God but also the limited perspectives of our fellow human beings made in God's image. The way to knowledge and certainty is the way of seeking additional perspectives, deeper perspectives.

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<sup>4</sup> See my essay "Certainty," found as appendix A in HWPT, 582-588.

## PERSPECTIVES WITHIN PERSPECTIVES

We have seen that God's omniperspective is a complexity.

It includes many perspectives within it. It includes the perspective of the fly on my office wall watching me type this manuscript, as well as all other possible and actual perspectives.

There is something similar in our own thinking, which images that of God. In the image of God's omniperspectivalism, the perspective of each human being incorporates perspectives from other human beings (like George and Sabrina) and from God. Even our knowledge of other perspectives is perspectival.

When God considers the perspective of the fly on my office wall, he may well consider that perspective from my perspective, as I take notice of the fly and watch its progress from the top of the wall to the middle. I may consider Sabrina's politics, part of her perspective, from the perspective of, say, Charles Krauthammer, a political commentator. Or Krauthammer's perspective from Sabrina's. In human thought, as in God's, there are perspectives on perspectives on perspectives. Our thinking images God's even in its complexity.

This is one way in which God has made the world a unity. Everything can be understood from the perspective of everything else.

*This is an excerpt from the book *Theology In Three Dimensions*, written by John M. Frame, © 2017 by Presbyterian & Reformed publishing. You can find this book, along with many others of interest, [here](#).*

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